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RUS42683.E

Russia: General situation of Roma (2001 to 2003)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Population

Like many ethnic minority groups in Russia, Roma do not have a homeland province within the Russian Federation (UK Apr. 2002). The results of the 2002 Russian census show that as of 2002 there were 183,000 Roma and 500 Central Asian Roma living in the Russian Federation (Russia 12 Feb. 2004). The results also show that 114,000 Roma and 300 Central Asian Roma lived in urban areas, while 69,000 Roma and 2,000 Central Asian Roma lived in rural areas (Russia 12 Feb. 2004). In 2001, the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) reported that the Roma population in Russia was increasingly moving towards urban centres, both in Russia and abroad (ECRI 13 November 2001). Sources caution that data on the Roma population in Russia is scarce since many Roma do not have official documents and are sometimes not registered in any system within the country (ECRI 13 Nov. 2001; ERRC July-Aug. 2003, 18).

Living Conditions

In 2001, the majority of Roma lived in conditions of poverty, lacking access to basic services (ECRI 13 Nov. 2001; *St. Petersburg Times* 23 Oct. 2001). The European Roma Rights Center, an international public interest law organization that monitors the situation of Roma, concurs that many Roma in Russia live in segregated (ERRC Mar. 2003, 6) and inadequate housing without basic infrastructure such as access to drinking water, heating, sewage disposal and electricity, or public services such as garbage removal, road repair (ibid. 3 July-Aug. 2003, 18), public transportation or telephone service (ibid. Mar. 2003, 6). ERRC commented that in 2003, the Russian authorities were not acting to ensure Roma had access to such public services and infrastructure (ibid., 16), were discriminating against Roma in the provision of housing (ibid., 1, 2), and were failing to provide Roma in need with adequate, alternate housing (ibid., 16).

Research done by ERRC in northwest Russia in 2002 revealed that Roma were having difficulty accessing employment there (ibid. 9 May 2002b). In general, lucrative employment is scarce in Romani settlements and the possibility of working regular hours in economic centres is limited as a result of the insufficient public transportation system and the distance of Romani settlements from economic centres (ibid. Mar. 2003, 6). Although official unemployment statistics for Roma in Russia could not be found within the time constraints of this response, Inter Press Service reported in 2002 that Roma faced "massive" unemployment (IPS 17 Dec. 2002). Furthermore, many Roma who held Soviet passports at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union have been refused when they sought to have them replaced with Russian passports (*St. Petersburg Times* 8 Apr. 2003). Without Russian passports, the Roma cannot register as residents, which means they cannot have access to health care, employment, or state benefits, and that their children cannot attend school (ibid.).

Although statistics could not be found within the time constraints of this Response, ECRI reports that the number of Romani children enrolled in school in Russia is decreasing (ECRI 13 Nov. 2001). According to ERRC, the majority of Romani children do not attend school because their parents cannot afford to purchase clothes and books for them (ERRC 9 May 2002b). Romani children enrolled in school often have to walk long distances to attend (ibid.). Margarita Marshinnikova, principal of a St. Petersburg elementary school who personally attempted to draw Romani students to her school by visiting Romani families and including activities related to Romani culture in the curriculum, stated that most schools in St. Petersburg do not encourage Roma to attend and moreover, most teachers refused to teach Roma, thinking that to do so was a waste of their time (*St. Petersburg Times* 23 Oct. 2001).

ECRI believes the living conditions of Roma in Russia are such because Roma are not aware of their rights, do not have residence permits or because local authorities are indifferent towards Roma and discriminate

against them (ECRI 13 Nov. 2001). The *St. Petersburg Times* describes the situation of Roma in Russia as a vicious circle: children's access to education is limited by a lack of official documents, by poverty and illiteracy; those unable to register or afford supplies for school remain illiterate and cannot fill out applications to obtain official documents, which leads to conflicts with state authorities (23 Oct. 2001). Without identification documents Roma are deprived of state benefits, which drives them deeper into poverty (*St. Petersburg Times* 23 Oct. 2001).

Although ECRI notes that local initiatives have been taken to improve the living situation of Romani communities in Russia, ECRI argues that the poor living conditions in Romani settlements and bleak prospects for the future lure some Roma into illegal activities which leaves them open to general societal prejudice, as well as prejudice from the authorities, and this results in marginalization and stereotyping of the Roma population in general (ECRI 13 Nov. 2001). In the opinion of a Russian human rights activist and monitor for ERRC, "poverty among Russian Roma is widespread, it is growing, it is not remedied by the state, and the public seems to be unaware of it" (ibid.).

Sources have reported on criminal activity of Roma in Russia. *Izvestiya* reported in 2002 that Moscow Roma sell stolen gold (17 July 2002). Also, in August 2003, a group of Romani children allegedly encircled tourists in St. Petersburg, preventing them from moving in any direction, in order to steal from them (*St. Petersburg Times* 25 May 2004; UPI News 15 Oct. 2003) and in September 2003 a similar incident occurred in St. Petersburg (ibid.). In addition, on 28 May 2004, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that the St. Petersburg police had arrested fifteen Roma women and charged them with stealing from tourists (*St. Petersburg Times* 28 May 2004). Additionally, there are police reports of Roma acting as drug dealers (FBIS Report 23 Jan. 2004).

Treatment of Roma

The 2003 Nations in Transit report on Russia stated that extremist groups target Roma in Russia (Freedom House 2003, 510). However, the United Kingdom Home Office Report for Russia 2001, 2002, as well as *Country Reports 2001, 2002 and 2003* state that Roma are subject to discrimination by government employees as well as society, and sometimes violence, even though the Russian Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of nationality (UK 2002; *Country Report 2003* 25 Feb. 2004; *Country Report 2002* 31 Mar. 2003; *Country Report 2001* 4 Mar. 2002). ERRC adds that, "all aspects of the relationship between Roma and non-Roma in Russia are suffused with discrimination, and racial discrimination against Roma is alleged in all sectoral fields" (ERRC Jul-Aug 2003, 2). Moscow Helsinki Group writes that in many areas it is dangerous for young Roma to be alone and especially at night (MHG 2002). Local populations express their hostility towards Roma through arson of Romani homes, but also through insults on the street and by throwing rocks at Roma (ibid.). According to Stefanya Kulayeva project leader of Northwest Center for Social and Legal Assistance to Roma in 2003, racially motivated attacks on Roma in Russia have become more violent and more frequent since 2000 (*St. Petersburg Times* 8 Apr. 2003). *St. Petersburg Times* has also indicated that increasing anti-Roma feelings in Russia have prompted some Roma to identify as ethnic groups other than Roma (8 Apr. 2003).

Roma and the Government Authorities

In July 2002, the Russian Ministry of the Interior conducted a ten-day action entitled Operation Tabor in both the Moscow and St. Petersburg regions (IPS 17 Dec. 2002; IHF 11 Sept. 2002; *Izvestiya* 17 July 2002), which was the second such operation conducted in 2002 in Moscow (ibid.). According to Deputy Interior Minister Aleksandr Chekalin, the operation was designed to combat both the exploitation of Roma children and the proliferation of drug trafficking through the conducting a mass document searches of Roma (IHF 11 Sept. 2002). At train stations in Moscow, police checked documents of everyone who appeared to be ethnically Roma to verify their registration (ibid.). Those who were not registered had their fingerprints taken and were brought to the outskirts of the city, where they were left (ibid.) The information collected was allegedly included in a special police database (ERRC 31 July 2002b). In Moscow in March 2002, 140 unregistered individuals were uncovered and more than 120 Roma were detained for various offences (*Izvestiya* 17 July 2002). The operation in July 2002 extended to non-Roma who housed and supported Roma (ERRC 31 July 2002b). The *St. Petersburg Times* reported on 25 May 2004 that Operation Tabor was launched in St. Petersburg again in 2004 from May 20 to May 31. According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, the purpose of this operation, which was undertaken at the request of the Russian Tourist Industry Union, was to protect tourists from being robbed (25 May 2004).

According to *Glasnost*, a publication of northern Caucasus, in October 2001, authorities forcibly expelled more than 100 Roma from the Krasnodar region to the city of Voronezh, their official place of residence (ERRC Mar. 2003, 7). Authorities claimed that Roma were involved in drug trafficking, but *Country Reports 2001* and *Country Report 2002* wrote that police brought no formal charges against Roma for this (ibid.; *Country Reports 2002* 31 Mar. 2003; *Country Reports 2001* 4 Mar. 2002).

On the treatment of Roma by the government authorities, ERRC writes that local officials remain passive with regards to assisting Roma in obtaining documents and registration, and fail to provide adequate

administrative services to Roma for residence permits (ERRC 14 July 2003, 2, 12).

Roma and the Police

According to *Country Reports 2002* and MHG, police have physically assaulted Roma in Russia (*Country Reports 2002* 31 Mar. 2003; MHG 2002). Roma have also reportedly been tortured in police custody, at times resulting in death (IHF 8 Oct. 2003; ERRC July-Aug. 2003, 3, 9), and have made confessions under duress (ibid., 3). The ERRC writes that law enforcement officials allegedly solicit bribes from Roma whom they label as suspect and if Roma do not pay the bribes, law enforcement officials threaten to plant drugs in the household or in the personal belongings of Roma (ibid., 15). In corroboration, Stefanya Kulayeva, project leader of the Northwest Center for Social and Legal Assistance to Roma commented in 2003 that police take advantage of the poor educational background of Roma and their lack of familiarity with their civil rights in order to extort money from them, and often plant drugs on them to extract money from the Roma (*St. Petersburg Times* 8 Apr. 2003).

Police and public officials also reportedly conduct "abusive" raids in Romani settlements in a number of regions of Russia (IHF 8 Oct. 2003; ERRC July-Aug. 2003, 3, 9; MHG n.d.). The Moscow Romani organization Romano Kher reported in March 2001 that police raided a Romani community in the village of Dorozhnyi, Kaliningrad region and beat and stole from some of the residents, allegedly in search of a suspect (ERRC 9 May 2002a). ERRC reported in January 2003 that a Romani man was allegedly beaten to death by two police officers in the village of Trubichino, Novgorod region, also by officers in search of a man suspected of theft, and the sister of the deceased filed a criminal complaint with the Novgorod Prosecutor's Office (ibid. 22 Oct. 2003b). The outcome of this complaint could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate for this Response. MHG acknowledges several police attacks on Roma houses in Trubichino in 2001 (MHG 2002).

According to Olga Abramenko, head of the human rights organization Memorial's project to protect the Roma, police burned tents in an area where Roma lived while carrying out document checks in April 2004 (*St. Petersburg Times* 25 May 2004). Olga Abramenko also stated that although some Roma do steal, the police are not addressing such crime in the right manner and that document checks are used as an excuse to mistreat Roma (ibid.).

Roma and Extremist Groups

Members of formal and informal extremist groups target Roma and several other ethnic groups in Russia (Freedom House 2003; ERRC 14 July 2003, 3; MHG 2002). Moscow Helsinki Group reported that in Volgograd in August 2001, neo-nazis attacked several Roma, killing two of them (2002). Ethnic intolerance was cited as the only reason for the attack (ibid.). St. Petersburg teenagers reportedly attacked Roma women several times in 2002 at a train station and sprayed tear gas in their eyes (ibid.). In another incident, skinheads carrying chains, and wearing tall boots and black clothing with swastikas allegedly threatened a young Romani boy at school and then followed up with a threatening phone call to his house (ERRC 2002b). Soon after a swastika was found on a wall near the boy's home (ibid.). According to the Volgograd Romani Organization Gypsy Association, seven Roma were physically assaulted by a group of 30 Cossacks, a Russian nationalist group, in the city of Novopavlovsk, Stavropol region in 2002 and the Roma allegedly suffered from various injuries such as bruises, lacerations and lost teeth (ibid. 31 July 2002a). Police did arrive and called an ambulance, and as of 30 May 2002 an investigation had been initiated, but no one was detained in connection with the case (ibid.). In November 2002, AVS television network reported that a group of men physically attacked twelve Roma in the village of Yablonovsky, in the Krasnodar region (*FSU Monitor* 25 Nov. 2002). Although many of the victims were allegedly in need of medical attention, they were "afraid" to go to the hospital (ibid.). One person was arrested in connection with this attack and charged with "hooliganism while using a weapon" (ibid.). Also in the Krasnodar region, seven Volgograd skinheads were sentenced to serve time in prison for the murder of two Roma in December 2002 (AP 11 Dec. 2002; *FSU Monitor* 13 Dec. 2002). The International Romani Union reported in July 2003 that a number of Romani graves were destroyed in a cemetery in Volgograd (ERRC 9 Feb. 2004). In October 2003, three skinheads attacked Alexander Klein, a Romani activist, who was reportedly refused medical attention afterwards (ibid.). According to the human rights organization Memorial, a group of men threatened him with violence if he filed a complaint with the police and so Alexander Klein did not approach the police out of fear (ibid.).

According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, in September 2003 skinheads allegedly killed a young Roma girl and seriously injured a woman and two other Roma children who were living in a settlement next to a railway station in St. Petersburg (30 Sept. 2003). Police detained three suspects in custody on murder charges (ibid.). Information on the outcome of this case could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate (ibid.). A police spokesperson stated that police detained other Roma living in the settlement and some were sent by train to Archangelsk in northern Russia (ibid.). Stefanya Kulayeva, project leader at the Northwest Center for Social and Legal Assistance to Roma, notes that in 2003 it was common for groups of young people to violently ambush Roma just outside of Romani settlements (ibid. 8 Apr. 2003).

Boris Pustyntsev, head of St. Petersburg's human rights organization Citizen's Watch, commented in 2003 that police in St. Petersburg have initiated criminal cases over racially motivated attacks, but that the authorities still "play" with racists or extremists in order to gain their vote (ibid. 30 Sept. 2003). International Relations Professor Vasily Yagya identifies two reasons behind the reported rise of xenophobia in Russia: extremist group activity is encouraged by the meaningless sentences given by the courts for extremist activity and there is no condemnation of Russian political parties using slogans like "Russia for the Russians" (ibid. 19 Mar. 2004). Alexander Salitsky, a researcher at the Moscow Institute of International Relations adds that poor enforcement of Russian legislation, designed to protect minority groups, leaves Roma vulnerable to physical attacks (IPS 17 Dec. 2002).

Roma and the Russian Courts

According to ERRC, Roma suffer from widespread discrimination in the administration of justice in Russia (ERRC 14 July 2003, 13). ERRC writes that the judicial authorities generally ignore Romani complaints about human rights or merely go through the motions of investigating them (ibid.). ERRC also notes that Roma have been denied access to the courts, have been detained for very long periods before their trial and after sentencing, and have been beaten during detention (ibid. 14). MHG adds that investigators, prosecutors and judges often subject Roma to unwarranted searches and arrests, undue verdicts and inappropriate lengths of imprisonment (MHG 2002). For example, a Roma together with Russian friends broke a store window and after being apprehended all pleaded guilty, but the Roma was sentenced to three years in prison while the others were released (ibid.). The judge openly admitted that the Roma was sent to prison only because of his ethnicity (ibid.).

Roma and the Russian Media

According to ERRC, in March 2002, Russian national newspapers, television and radio programs supported Operation Tabor by broadcasting daily reports on Romani criminals who were allegedly in charge of the drug trade and who lured Russians in to the trade, and some media went even further to encourage discrimination and even "racially motivated cleansing of Roma" (ERRC 14 July 2003, 3; IPS 17 Dec. 2002). A report on RTR TV in July 2002 discussed Operation Tabor and allegedly portrayed Roma as criminals and clairvoyants, and concluded that "although Operation Tabor is over, the problem remains: It does not seem that there will be fewer [Roma] in the future" (RFE/RL 25 July 2002). In the opinion of ERRC and MHG, this type of coverage of the Roma population adds to the hostility towards Roma in Russia (ERRC 3 July 2003, 3; MHG 2002).

Protection

The Northwest Center for Social and Legal Assistance to Roma, opened in January 2003 in St. Petersburg, is home to a community organization which helps inform Roma of their rights (St. Petersburg Times 8 Apr. 2003). Through the organization, a lawyer is available to travel to Romani settlements in north-west Russia to provide legal advice (ibid.).

In December 2002, the Moscow non-governmental organization International Protection Center (IPC) filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights on behalf of a Romani woman, who was arrested for alleged drug trafficking and subsequently subjected to "unjust" detention and trial (ERRC 22 Oct. 2003a). No details on this case could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

In March 2004, the legislative assembly of St. Petersburg passed a law forbidding any action that aims to restrict the rights of any citizen on the grounds of their race or ethnicity (St. Petersburg Times 19 Mar. 2004). A copy of this law could not be found within the time constraints of this response.

In the opinion of IHF and ERRC, Russian authorities have failed to sufficiently protect Roma from violent attacks by skinheads (IHF 8 Oct. 2003) and nationalist-extremist groups (ERRC July-Aug. 2003). Furthermore, according to IHF, officials are rarely prosecuted or disciplined for their misconduct against Roma (IHF 8 Oct. 2003). ERRC writes that

[t]he protection provided to Roma by authorities against human rights violations is often inadequate or entirely unavailable. [The] Russian Government has undertaken nothing to reduce anti-Romani sentiment or to stem the tide of vigilante and/or state-sponsored anti-Romani human rights abuses (3 July 2003, 3).

MHG and ERRC both noted that Roma generally do not seek protection, and ERRC suggests that this is out of fear of retaliation or out of shame, while MHG suggests the slack attitude of the authorities towards Romani complaints and extortion by officials are reasons for the Roma's approach (ibid., 9, 12; ibid. 2002a; MHG 2002). MHG notes that when Roma do try to protect their rights, "xenophobic attitudes" of the authorities become evident (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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